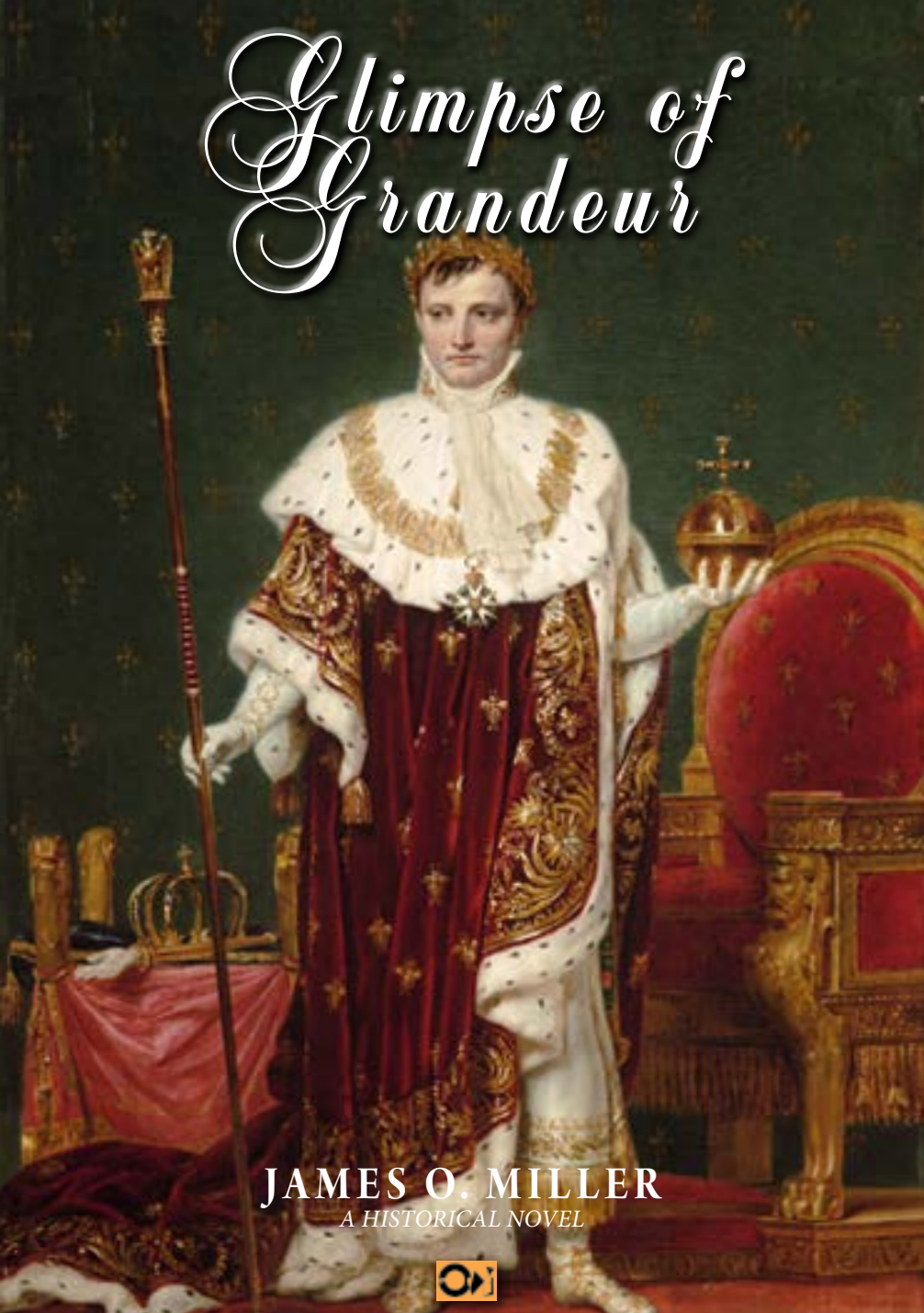
Glimpse of Grandeur



JAMES O. MILLER

A HISTORICAL NOVEL

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James O. Miller

Glimpse of grandeur

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The streets of Paris bustled with life as the cold December air mingled with the warmth of chatter, laughter, and the distant clatter of horseshoes on cobblestones. Crowds surged toward Notre Dame Cathedral, where Napoleon Bonaparte would soon be crowned Emperor of France. Flags bearing the imperial eagle fluttered from buildings, and garlands of laurel leaves adorned street corners, lending a festive air to the city.

Jean, a wiry 10-year-old with a mop of dark curls and a scarf wrapped tightly around his neck, tugged his younger sister, Sophie, by the hand as they darted between the throngs of people.

"Hurry up, Sophie! We'll miss the procession!" he called, his voice full of urgency.

Sophie, only eight but with a quick wit that often outmatched her brother's enthusiasm, frowned as she struggled to keep pace. "I'm hurrying! But if you pull me like that, I'll trip and miss everything altogether."

Jean stopped abruptly, causing Sophie to bump into him. "Do you realize what this means? Today, Napoleon becomes Emperor. The whole of Europe will tremble before France."

Sophie rolled her eyes. "The whole of Europe already trembles before him, Jean. That's why they call him a general."

"No," Jean said, his tone conspiratorial. "Today, he becomes more than a general. An Emperor, Sophie. Like Charlemagne. People will bow to him, kings and queens, even the Pope!"

They found a spot near the edge of the square where they could see the cathedral's grand façade. Jean climbed up onto a barrel to get a better view, pulling Sophie up beside him.

"Imagine if we were inside," Jean said dreamily, pointing to the tall stained-glass windows of Notre Dame. "Napoleon will march right up the aisle in his robes, all golden and red, and everyone will cheer."

"Will Josephine cheer too?" Sophie asked, tilting her head. "Or will she be worried he'll trip on those big robes you keep talking about?"

Jean laughed. "Josephine? She'll be the Empress! She'll wear a crown too... though not as grand as his."

"But why does he need a crown?" Sophie asked, her curiosity piqued. "Isn't he already the leader of France? Papa says everyone loves him already."

Jean leaned closer as if sharing a great secret. "Because crowns mean power. When you wear a crown, no one can argue with you. You're above everyone."

"But wouldn't it be better if people respected him because of what he does, not because of what he wears?" Sophie countered, her brow furrowed. "Papa also says that power isn't something you can hold in your hands. It's what people give you."

Jean scoffed. "Papa doesn't understand how great men think. Napoleon's a genius. He'll make France the greatest empire the world has ever seen."

Sophie squinted at her brother. "I think you just like the idea of wearing a shiny uniform."

Jean puffed out his chest. "One day, I'll join the

army, and maybe I'll even meet Napoleon himself. He'll see my courage and make me one of his generals."

Sophie giggled. "Only if you learn to march in a straight line, Jean."

Around them, the crowd grew restless as the sound of distant drums echoed through the streets. Vendors shouted their wares—hot chestnuts, sugared almonds, and cider—and children waved little flags in excitement. Sophie's attention wandered to the faces in the crowd: the young women in their Sunday best, the elderly men with proud but weary expressions, and the beggars lurking in the shadows of the festivities.

"Look at that man over there," Sophie said, pointing discreetly to a gaunt figure leaning against a lamppost. "He doesn't look happy at all."

Jean followed her gaze. "He's probably just cold."

"Or maybe he doesn't want an Emperor," Sophie whispered. "What if some people don't think this is a good idea?"

Jean frowned. "Don't be silly. Everyone loves Napoleon."

"But Papa said not everyone wanted him to be Emperor," Sophie insisted. "He said some people wanted to keep the Republic."

Jean rolled his eyes. "Papa worries too much. Napoleon is saving France from chaos. Without him, we'd still have all those arguments in the Assembly."

Sophie wasn't convinced. "But if he takes all the power for himself, who will stop him if he makes a mistake?"

Jean opened his mouth to respond, but a cheer from the crowd cut him off. A regiment of soldiers marched by in gleaming uniforms, their bayonets catching the winter sunlight. The sight made Jean's eyes light up with admiration.

"Look at them!" he exclaimed. "One day, I'll march like that. Do you think Napoleon is watching them too?"

Sophie shrugged. "Maybe. Or maybe he's getting ready to wear that heavy crown you love so much."

The sound of trumpets filled the air, and the crowd surged forward, pressing Jean and Sophie closer together. "Do you think we'll see him when he comes out?" Sophie asked, craning her neck.

Jean grinned. “Of course! We’ll see him, Sophie. And when we do, you’ll understand why he’s the greatest man in the world.”

Sophie crossed her arms, her expression sceptical but intrigued. “We’ll see, Jean. We’ll see.”

The morning chill had given way to a crisp, pale sunlight that painted Notre Dame in shades of gold. Jean and Sophie had abandoned their spot on the barrel and pushed their way through the crowd, their excitement undeterred by the jostling bodies around them.

“There!” Jean pointed toward a narrow alley beside a bakery. “If we climb that wall, we can get onto the roof of the stables. From there, we’ll see everything.”

Sophie hesitated, clutching the edges of her coat. “Climb the wall? What if we fall? Or worse, what if we get caught?”

Jean gave her an exasperated look. “Don’t be a coward, Sophie. Do you want to tell your grandchildren that you missed the day Napoleon was crowned because you were too afraid to climb a wall?”

Sophie frowned. “I’ll tell them I didn’t break my neck for a better view. That seems smarter.”

Jean ignored her protests, already boosting himself up onto the first ledge. Sophie sighed but followed, muttering about how ridiculous boys could be. With some effort and a few slips that left her hands scraped, she joined Jean on the stable roof.

From their new perch, the view of Notre Dame was unparalleled. Below, the cobblestone streets were a sea of colour and movement. Soldiers in dazzling uniforms lined the path, their bayonets catching the sunlight. Carriages drawn by sleek horses clattered past, carrying nobles dressed in rich velvets and silks. Trumpets blared, and the crowd roared as one particularly grand carriage came into view.

Jean's eyes widened. "That's him. That has to be him!"

Sophie squinted, trying to make out the figure inside. "Are you sure? I can't see anything through all that gold and ...what is that? Is that an eagle on top of the carriage?"

Jean nodded vigorously. "It's the imperial eagle, Sophie. It's a symbol of power and victory."

Sophie tilted her head. "It looks like it's about to fly away. I wonder if Napoleon's afraid it'll peck him."

Jean gave her a withering look. “Do you always have to make jokes about everything?”

“Yes,” Sophie replied with a grin. “It’s the only thing that keeps me sane when you’re being so serious.”

As they bickered, the sound of distant cannon fire boomed across the city, signalling the official start of the ceremony. The crowd erupted into cheers, waving tricolour flags and shouting, “Vive l’Empereur!”

Jean clasped Sophie’s arm, his excitement palpable. “Listen to them! Do you hear that? The whole city is celebrating!”

Sophie glanced at the cheering masses below, then back at her brother. “Not everyone, Jean. Look over there.”

She pointed to a cluster of people standing apart from the crowd. Their expressions were sombre, their arms crossed as they watched the spectacle with thinly veiled disapproval.

“Who are they?” Sophie asked. “Why aren’t they cheering?”

Jean shrugged. “Probably royalists. Or republicans. Either way, they’re wrong. Napoleon is exactly what France needs.”

Sophie frowned. “Papa says people like them have their reasons. Not everyone thinks one man should have all the power.”

Jean waved her off. “Papa’s a merchant, not a soldier. He doesn’t understand politics like Napoleon does.”

Sophie opened her mouth to argue but was interrupted by another cheer from the crowd. A smaller carriage had appeared, its occupant dressed in white robes and a golden mitre.

Sophie gasped. “Is that the Pope?”

Jean nodded, his chest puffed with pride. “Pope Pius VII. He came all the way from Rome to crown Napoleon. That’s how important this day is.”

Sophie tilted her head. “Or maybe Napoleon needs him to look important.”

Jean turned to her, his face flushed with indignation. “You don’t understand anything about greatness, Sophie. The Pope wouldn’t come here if he didn’t think Napoleon deserved it.”

Sophie raised an eyebrow. “Maybe. Or maybe Napoleon made him come. Didn’t Papa say Napoleon’s

been arguing with the Pope over how much control he should have in France?"

Jean's voice grew louder, his passion overtaking him. "That's because Napoleon knows what's best for France! He's not afraid to stand up to anyone, even the Pope."

Sophie's tone softened, her curiosity genuine. "But if Napoleon is so powerful, why does he need a crown at all? Why not just keep leading the way he's been doing?"

Jean hesitated, searching for an answer. "Because… because the crown makes it official. It shows the world that France is united under one leader."

Sophie looked unconvinced. "But what happens if he starts making mistakes? Who will stop him if he's the only one in charge?"

Jean scowled, frustrated by her persistence. "Napoleon doesn't make mistakes. That's why he's Napoleon."

Before Sophie could respond, a deep, resonant voice from the street below caught their attention.

"Make way for the Imperial Guard!"

The children turned to see a contingent of soldiers marching in perfect unison, their polished boots striking the cobblestones in rhythm. Behind them came a line of carriages carrying members of the French court, their faces stern and proud.

Sophie's eyes lit up. "Look at her! Is that Empress Josephine?"

Jean followed her gaze. A graceful woman in a glittering gown and a delicate tiara sat in one of the carriages, her expression composed but warm as she waved to the crowd.

"She's beautiful," Sophie said softly. "Do you think she's happy?"

Jean snorted. "Of course she's happy. She's about to become the most powerful woman in France."

Sophie frowned. "But what if she doesn't want that? What if she'd rather just be a regular person?"

Jean rolled his eyes. "No one would rather be regular when they could be extraordinary."

Sophie looked thoughtful. "I don't know. Sometimes regular seems better. Less scary."

The procession continued, the pomp and grandeur growing with each passing moment. The children watched in awe as gilded carriages, richly adorned horses, and high-ranking officials paraded by. Finally, the massive doors of Notre Dame swung open, and the crowd surged forward, eager for a glimpse of the ceremony inside.

From their perch, Jean and Sophie could see glimpses of the cathedral's interior, a sea of flickering candles, golden decorations, and the faint outline of the altar.

Jean's voice was hushed with reverence. "Can you imagine what it's like in there? The music, the prayers… It must be incredible."

Sophie nodded, her usual scepticism replaced by a quiet sense of wonder. "Maybe. But I think I'd rather be out here. It feels more real."

Jean turned to her, surprised by her words. "What do you mean?"

Sophie gestured to the people below—the cheering crowds, the sceptical onlookers, the beggars in the shadows. "All of this… it's France. Not just the people in the cathedral. They're important too."

Jean didn't reply, but his expression softened as he considered her words. For a moment, the siblings sat in silence, the sounds of the city washing over them.

As the cannons fired again, signalling the ceremony's climax, Jean's voice broke the quiet. "One day, Sophie, I'll make you see. Napoleon isn't just a man. He's history."

Sophie smiled faintly. "Maybe. But history isn't just one man, Jean. It's all of us."

The distant toll of the cathedral bells rang out, their solemn echo announcing the climax of the day. From their vantage point on the roof, Jean and Sophie couldn't see inside Notre Dame, but they felt the magnitude of the moment in the air. The city seemed to hold its breath as history unfolded within the cathedral's walls.

Jean leaned forward, his fists clenched on the edge of the roof. "This is it. He's about to be crowned."

Sophie glanced at him, her brows knitting together. "How can you tell? We can't see anything from here."

Jean gestured toward the crowd below. "Look at them. Everyone's waiting. You can feel it, Sophie. This is when everything changes."

Sophie tilted her head, watching as the crowd buzzed with whispers. "What do you think it's like in there? Do you think it's quiet?"

Jean grinned, his eyes alight with excitement. "Quiet? Are you joking? The place must be filled with trumpets, drums, and the choir singing. Napoleon's standing at the altar in that big red robe they keep talking about. The Pope's holding the crown, and everyone's watching."

Sophie smiled faintly, amused by his enthusiasm. "And you can see all of this in your head, can you?"

"Yes!" Jean said, turning to her with a fiery determination. "It's like I'm there. He's standing tall, with everyone in the cathedral staring at him. The generals, the nobles, even the foreign ambassadors, they all know they're in the presence of greatness."

Sophie raised an eyebrow. "Do you think Josephine is staring at him too? Or is she thinking about how tight her dress is?"

Jean frowned. "Don't ruin it, Sophie. This is serious."

Sophie's grin widened. "I am being serious! She's wearing that big gown they've been talking about,

right? The one with all the jewels and gold thread? I bet she can barely breathe."

Jean sighed, exasperated. "Josephine knows how important this is. She's not thinking about her dress. She's proud to be standing beside Napoleon."

Sophie's expression softened. "You really believe that, don't you?"

Jean paused, his confidence faltering slightly. "Of course I do. Why wouldn't she be?"

Sophie looked out at the cathedral, her tone thoughtful. "I don't know. Being an empress sounds… lonely. Like everyone's watching you all the time, waiting for you to make a mistake."

Jean turned to her, his voice firm. "It's not lonely. It's powerful. Josephine gets to stand beside the man who's going to make France the greatest country in the world."

Sophie studied her brother, her eyes filled with curiosity. "And what about Napoleon? Do you think he feels lonely?"

Jean hesitated, caught off guard by the question. "Napoleon doesn't have time to feel lonely. He's too busy leading."

Sophie rested her chin on her hand. “But he’s human, isn’t he? Even great men must get tired sometimes. Or scared.”

Jean bristled at the suggestion. “Napoleon isn’t scared of anything. That’s why he’s the Emperor.”

Sophie’s gaze didn’t waver. “Even emperors are just men, Jean.”

Before he could respond, the crowd below erupted into cheers. Jean and Sophie leaned forward, straining to catch a glimpse of what was happening. The cathedral doors remained closed, but the sound of trumpets and the distant roar of voices painted a vivid picture in their minds.

Jean’s eyes gleamed. “He’s done it. He’s taken the crown.”

Sophie glanced at him. “How do you know? Maybe the Pope’s still holding it.”

Jean shook his head, his voice filled with conviction. “No. Napoleon wouldn’t let anyone else crown him. He’s making a statement, Sophie. He’s saying that his power comes from himself, not from the church or anyone else.”

Sophie frowned. “Isn’t that dangerous? If he doesn’t trust the Pope, why should the people trust him?”

Jean’s expression hardened. “You don’t understand. Napoleon doesn’t need the Pope’s approval. That’s what makes him strong. He’s not like the old kings who were controlled by the church. He’s his own man.”

Sophie looked unconvinced. “But isn’t it better to have people on your side? If he pushes everyone away, who will stand with him when things get hard?”

Jean waved her off. “That’s why he has the army. The soldiers love him. They’ll follow him anywhere.”

Sophie’s voice grew quieter, her tone pensive. “But what about the rest of us? The merchants, the farmers… people like Mama and Papa? Do we matter to him?”

Jean turned to her, his frustration evident. “Of course we matter. That’s why he’s doing this! To make France strong, so that people like us can have better lives.”

Sophie didn’t reply, her eyes fixed on the cathedral. For a moment, they sat in silence, the distant sounds of the ceremony mingling with the murmurs of the crowd.

Finally, Sophie spoke, her voice barely above a whisper. “I hope you’re right, Jean.”

Jean looked at her, his expression softening. “I am. You’ll see. One day, you’ll understand.”

As the ceremony inside the cathedral reached its climax, the siblings’ conversation drifted into speculation. Jean painted a vivid picture of Napoleon lifting the crown from the Pope’s hands and placing it on his own head, a gesture that symbolized his independence and strength.

“He’s probably standing there now,” Jean said, his voice brimming with admiration. “His head held high, looking out at everyone like a true leader. They’ll talk about this day for centuries, Sophie. It’s the day France became an empire.”

Sophie nodded slowly, her thoughts a tangle of questions she didn’t yet know how to articulate. The grandeur of the moment was undeniable, but so was the weight of the crown—and the loneliness it might bring.

As the cathedral bells rang out once more, signalling the end of the ceremony, Jean and Sophie sat together on the roof, their differing perspectives a qui-

et echo of the larger debates stirring across France. The coronation was over, but the story of Napoleon's reign was just beginning.

The cathedral bells tolled in the cold December air, their solemn clangs mixing with the sound of jubilant cheers from the crowds below. Jean and Sophie climbed down from their rooftop perch, blending into the throngs of people filling the streets of Paris. The day had turned into an impromptu festival—fireworks crackled in the distance, and torches lit the roads with flickering light.

"Did you hear them? Everyone's calling him 'Emperor!'" Jean exclaimed, his cheeks flushed from the excitement. "Did you see the banners? They're everywhere... 'Vive l'Empereur!' This is the start of something incredible, Sophie. I can feel it."

Sophie pulled her scarf tighter around her neck, her brow furrowed. "It's loud, that's for sure. But do you hear what they're saying in the quieter corners?"

Jean tilted his head, confused. "What do you mean?"

Sophie gestured subtly toward a nearby alley, where a stooped woman wrapped in rags muttered under her breath. "Listen."

The woman's voice was low and bitter, her words carrying the weight of disappointment. "Liberty, equality, fraternity… all crushed under a golden crown."

Sophie's expression darkened. "She's not the only one. I heard others, too. Not everyone's happy about today."

Jean rolled his eyes. "Of course not. There are always people who can't see what's right in front of them. Napoleon is what France needs, someone strong, someone who can lead."

The siblings continued through the streets, weaving past wine vendors and impromptu dancers celebrating the occasion. A man in a patched coat raised his cup high. "To Napoleon! The Emperor of the French!" he shouted, drawing cheers from the crowd around him.

Jean smirked at Sophie. "See? He's already uniting the people."

Sophie didn't respond, her gaze drifting to a corner where two men huddled in conversation. She strained to hear their words.

"First, he crowns himself. Next, he'll be ruling like

a king again," one man muttered, his tone heavy with suspicion.

"Don't be a fool," the other replied sharply. "Napoleon's not like the Bourbons. He's a man of the people."

"A man of the people doesn't need a golden throne," the first man retorted.

Sophie stepped closer to Jean, her voice quiet. "What if they're right?"

Jean frowned. "About what?"

"That he's not doing this for France. What if he's doing it for himself?"

Jean stopped walking, turning to face her. "How can you even say that, Sophie? Have you forgotten what he's done for us? For Mama and Papa? The wars he's fought to keep France safe?"

Sophie's gaze didn't waver. "I haven't forgotten. But power changes people, Jean. What if—"

"What if, what if!" Jean interrupted, his voice rising. "What if Napoleon's the only reason we're not living in chaos? What if he's the only one brave enough to do what needs to be done?"

Sophie sighed, her breath visible in the chilly air. "And what if he's the reason we end up back in chaos? What if all of this..." she gestured at the celebrating crowds, the fireworks bursting overhead, "...is just a mask for something darker?"

Jean's jaw tightened. "You don't understand, Sophie. You don't see the big picture. Today was history. People will remember this day for centuries."

Sophie crossed her arms. "And what will they remember it as, Jean? The day Napoleon became Emperor? Or the day France lost its freedom again?"

Their argument was interrupted by a sudden commotion. A group of soldiers marched past, their polished boots clacking against the cobblestones. The crowd cheered wildly, but Sophie noticed a man pulling his child out of their path, his face pale with fear.

"Did you see that?" she asked, nudging Jean.

He shrugged. "It's just soldiers. They're keeping order."

"Or they're showing us who's in charge," Sophie murmured.

The siblings walked in silence for a while, the energy of the crowd washing over them in waves. Jean

hummed a marching tune under his breath, his mood lightening despite their argument. Sophie, however, couldn't shake the unease that had settled in her chest.

As they neared their home, the streets grew quieter, the distant sounds of the celebration fading into the night. Sophie stopped suddenly, her gaze fixed on a single figure standing beneath a dim streetlamp. It was the beggar woman they had seen earlier, her gaunt face illuminated by the flickering light.

The woman's eyes met Sophie's, and she spoke in a raspy voice. "He wears a crown now, but crowns are heavy things. They crush the heads of those who wear them and the hearts of those who follow."

Sophie shivered, the woman's words lingering in her mind as she and Jean continued walking. She glanced at her brother, wondering if he had heard, but his expression was unreadable.

When they finally reached their home, Jean turned to her, his tone softer. "You worry too much, Sophie. Napoleon's not perfect, but he's what we have. He's what we need."

Sophie didn't reply, her thoughts too tangled to form a response. She climbed into bed that night,

staring at the ceiling as the fireworks continued to burst in the distance.

Weeks later, Sophie woke to the sound of distant cannon fire, a salute for Napoleon's triumphal return to Paris after a brief military campaign. Jean rushed out to join the crowds, his excitement palpable. Sophie followed reluctantly, her unease growing.

As they stood among the cheering masses, Sophie caught sight of the beggar woman again, her face etched with despair. The woman turned to Sophie, her voice a whisper beneath the crowd's roar. "The crown is too heavy. You'll see."

The words sent a chill down Sophie's spine. She looked up at Jean, his face alight with hope, and felt a pang of fear for what the future might hold, for France, for her family, and for the brother who believed so deeply in the man crowned Emperor.

The story ends with Sophie's quiet realization: the coronation was not just the beginning of an empire but the beginning of a great and terrible gamble. Napoleon's rise had ignited a flame in France, but whether it would warm the nation or burn it to ashes was a question that only time could answer.

Glimpse of grandeur

James O. Miller

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Glimpse of Grandeur

James O. Miller. After 23 years of high school teaching history and four years teaching in Germany retirement didn't come well especially since I hate gardening and golf. So I decided to exercise my imagination combined with my academic knowledge.

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